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Should We Judge Government?

by David R. Henderson / February 05, 2007

Recently I ran into a colleague from the Naval Postgraduate School, where I teach, and got into an interesting conversation. It highlighted the differences between how I think of the world and how many pro-U.S. government people, and pro-government people in general, think of the world. That's why I'm sharing it with you. I'm not giving his name for two reasons: (1) I genuinely like him and (2) I'll have a lot fewer such interesting conversations in the future if I start naming people with whom I have them. I'll name him John.

John had been down to Colombia and told me that many of the businessmen there are anticapitalist. Here's how our discussion went:

David: Is it possible that they think they're anticapitalist because they are really anti-U.S. government and they think of the United States as the quintessential capitalist country? So, in other words, is it possible that they're confusing capitalism with the U.S. government?

John: But they're not anti-U.S. government. We [by which he meant "the U.S. government"] are pumping four and a half billion dollars into their economy each year.

David: Yeah, but that's to destroy their economy. The government is sending that money so that the Colombian government will use it to destroy their coca crop. We [by which I meant "we"] wouldn't say an infusion of four and a half billion dollars from Colombia was good for our economy if the Colombians gave it to the U.S. government on condition that the U.S. government eradicate corn.

John: I think the U.S. marijuana crop would be a better analogy.

David: Okay. Many of us would be upset if the Colombian government paid the U.S. government to eradicate the U.S. marijuana crop.

John: But that money is going to create 2,000 good, well-paying jobs in Colombia.

Our conversation then ended because I saw the Pacific Grove High School girls' basketball coach walk by, and we got into an interesting discussion about the boys' and girls' teams. I've got my priorities.

The discussion above highlights two differences between the way I view the government and the way many people, maybe most people, view the government.

The first difference is that many people have a tendency to judge the fact that the government is spending money as good in itself, almost regardless of what the government spends it on. They don't ask whether the expenditure is for good or bad things. (Of course, they don't ask whether it's right to take people's money from them by force, as the U.S. government does out of almost every paycheck, to do these good or bad things. But more on that some other time.) They have a much lower hurdle for government's actions than they do for individuals' actions. So, for example, if I had told my friend John that I was getting together a group to give the Colombian government \$4.5 billion to go after Colombian coca growers and that I would threaten to blockade goods coming from Colombia to the United States if the Colombian government didn't cooperate, I don't think John would have looked at me, stroked his chin, and said, "Good idea, David." [Yet that is essentially what the U.S. government](#)

[does.](#)

And it's not just many people who work for the U.S. government, as my colleague does, who think this way. Diane Sawyer of ABC News did a special 20/20 on [poverty in America](#) on Jan. 26. In it, she showed heart-rending scenes of poor, innocent black children in Camden, N.J., talking about how they wanted to live in a place where they weren't awakened by gunfire from gang wars. Elsewhere in the piece, Sawyer showed policemen literally tackling people to the ground for the "crime" of selling illegal drugs to willing buyers. In Sawyer's voice, there was no hint of disapproval of the policemen's actions. Did Sawyer make the connection between the government's war on drugs and the gang violence of drug dealers? Did ABC News bother to interview an expert who might explain this connection? No to both. I realize that economic literacy, which shows how making goods illegal drives the market in these goods into the underground, where gang wars are frequent, is too much to ask. The only well-known economically literate person at ABC is [John Stossel](#), and he was not involved in this report.

As I say, I'm not asking for economic literacy, nice as that would be. I'm just asking for a little compassion, perspective, and judgment. Imagine a conversation between Diane Sawyer and me:

David: I've got a great idea for solving poverty in Camden. I'm going to form a gang that will carry guns and tackle everyone we see buying or selling drugs. Then I'm going to lock them up for as long as I can, even if they're important breadwinners for their families.

Diane: That's a great idea, David. Where can I contribute?

It wouldn't happen, right? She wouldn't think it a great idea. So why doesn't she take the next step and see that it doesn't matter whether the entity using force against poor people is a gang headed by me or a gang of policemen? Because the government is doing it, Diane Sawyer, like my colleague, has dropped her critical faculties.

The second difference between the way many people look at government and my view of government has to do with the "2,000 jobs" comment that my colleague made. I didn't respond then because I wanted to talk basketball, but here's my answer.

Work is not wealth. You can point out that 2,000 people have well-paying jobs, and that tells us literally nothing about whether those jobs are making society wealthier. The wealth of those 2,000 people could be increasing, but they're only a subset of society. If those 2,000 people are trying to destroy the peaceful livelihoods of people who are growing a crop that other people want, then those 2,000 people are having a net negative effect on society's wealth. Although I'm not advocating this, we would be better off paying them to do nothing than paying them to destroy. And we would be even better off paying them to do something that others value. What would be evidence of value? The fact that others are willing to pay for it. All we know when we see government spending people's money is that the *government* wants it. The problem is that the government is spending other people's money and so the government's expenditure is not sufficient evidence of value.

The main way we'll get any progress in government policy is to recognize that government, as the 20th century showed, is [capable of great harm](#) and to judge governments as carefully as we judge each other.

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